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ABSTRACT

Through a multiple case study design the influence of teachers beliefs on literacy instruction for at-risk first graders was examined and described. The volunteer sample of five female teachers who taught in different high risk schools within the same school district participated in the study. Five issues guided the study: teachers beliefs about instructing young at-risk students to read and write; what teachers say they do as they instruct young at-risk children to read and write; what teachers actually do; what influences teachers' instructional decisions; and congruencies between teachers stated beliefs and their practice. Data were collected from interviews, observations, questionnaires and a reflective activity over one academic year. Through the constant comparative method 10 general findings emerged: (1) teachers must possess an understanding of the individual needs of at-risk children and address those needs; (2) teachers must recognize and build on children's individual strengths; (3) teachers should nurture children's enthusiasm for learning to read and write; (4) the learning process should begin at the appropriate developmental level; (5) at-risk children should be continuously stimulated in order to build confidence necessary for learning--a structured environment is important to accomplishing this goal; (6) at-risk children break the bonds of at-riskness by becoming literate; (7) literacy instructional theory does not influence teachers practice as much as their beliefs; (8) there is no single method of literacy instruction for at-risk children, a combination of pedagogical approaches best serves their literacy needs; (9) teacher modeling is a positive motivational factor for at-risk children learning to read and write; and (10) all at-risk children can learn. Other findings indicated: teachers literacy instructional decisions are influenced by multiple factors; and congruencies between teachers stated beliefs and practice were found. The five case studies validate the work of previous researchers who suggested that teachers beliefs are an integral part of classroom practice. They provide documented instances of the congruency between beliefs and classroom practice. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/ND)

The Influence of Teachers' Beliefs on Literacy Development for At-Risk First Grade Students

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ABSTRACT

Through a multiple case study design the influence of teachers' beliefs on literacy instruction for at-risk first graders was examined and described. The volunteer sample of five female teachers who taught in different high risk schools within the same school district participated in the study. Five research questions guided the study: (1) What are teachers' beliefs about instructing young at-risk children to read and write? (2) What do teachers say they do as they instruct young at-risk children to read and write? (3) What do teachers actually do as they instruct young at-risk children to read and write? (4) What influences teachers' instructional decisions as they teach young at-risk children to read and write? (5) Are there congruencies between teachers' stated beliefs and their practice?

Data were collected from interviews, observations, questionnaires and a reflective activity over an academic year. Through the constant comparative method twelve general findings emerged: (1) Teachers must possess an understanding of the individual needs of at-risk children and address those needs. (2) Teachers must recognize and build on children's individual strengths. (3) Teachers should nurture children's enthusiasm for learning to read and write. (4.) The learning process should begin at the appropriate developmental level. (5.) At-risk children should be

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continuously stimulated in order to build confidence necessary for learning. A structured environment is important to accomplishing this goal. (6.) At-risk children break the bonds of at-riskness by becoming literate. (7.) Literacy instructional theory does not influence teachers' practice as much as their beliefs. (8.) There is no single method of literacy instruction for at-risk children, a combination of pedagogical approaches best serves their literacy needs. (9.) Teacher modeling is a positive motivational factor for at-risk children learning to read and write. (10.) All at-risk children can learn.

Other findings indicated: (1.) Teachers' literacy instructional decisions, are influenced by multiple factors. (2.) Congruencies between teachers' stated beliefs and practice were found.

The five case studies validate the work of previous researchers who suggested that teachers' beliefs are an integral part of classroom practice. They provided documented instances of the congruency between beliefs and classroom practice.

The Influence Of Teachers' Beliefs On Literacy Development for At-Risk First Grade Students

Paper Presented to 48th. Annual Meeting

AACTE

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Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the influence of teachers' beliefs on literacy instruction for at-risk first graders. The goals were to report what teachers say they believe about teaching a specific content and a specific population of children and to observe and report the connection between what they say they do and what they actually do in the classroom.

Research questions that guided the study:

1. What are teachers' beliefs about instructing young at-risk children ?

2. What do teachers say they do as they instruct young at-risk children?

3. What do teachers actually do as they instruct young at-risk children ?

4. What influences teachers' instructional decisions as they teach young at-risk children?

5. Are there congruencies between teachers' stated beliefs and their practice?

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Assumptions And Theoretical Framework For The Study:

While researchers have approached the study of teachers' beliefs from a variety of perspectives, there are commonalties in the underlying assumptions of their work which I have incorporated into the theoretical framework for this study. The first assumption is that teachers' beliefs guide what they do in the classroom, and that these beliefs play a significant role in shaping curricular decisions and classroom learning experiences for students. Included in this assumption is the idea that teachers' practices are firmly rooted in their beliefs about learning and reflect personal and professional knowledge (Mills & Clyde, 1991). In addition, teachers' plans and actions are filtered through their beliefs (Stern and Shavelson, 1983).

A second assumption guiding this study was that external factors affect teachers' beliefs. These external factors may include the content being taught (early literacy instruction), the population of students (at-risk children), the administrative requirements, state and federal guidelines, etc. (Duffy & Anderson, 1982; Duffy, 1983; Lampert, 1985). When external factors complement teachers' beliefs, classroom practice and beliefs are compatible. When these factors interfere with teachers' beliefs, classroom practice and beliefs are disjointed. In addition, teachers have beliefs about specific external factors. For example, if teachers truly believe that all children are capable of learning, then their pedagogical practice will reflect the highest standards regardless of the student population. Because teachers have beliefs based on their personal and professional knowledge as well as external factors, classroom practice is ultimately shaped by the interrelationship of these components (Nespor, 1985).

A third assumption of this study was that teachers are capable of articulating their beliefs given the opportunity to do so. Watson, Burke & Harste (1989) implied that in order for a teacher to become completely aware of the scope of learning opportunities they are offering their students, they should first examine their own belief systems about teaching, learning, and the uniqueness of individual children. This examination requires a reflective thought process, which in the past has not been an important component of teacher education. Recent research endeavors have centered on classroom teachers engaged in reflective thinking and have demonstrated that teachers are able to articulate their beliefs through a variety of reflective activities (Argyrus & Schon, 1975; Bussis, Chittemdem, and Amarel, 1976; Goodman & Watson, 1977; Spodek, 1988).

Format and Methodology:

Case study format was appropriate for this research endeavor because it allowed inquiry into the experiences of the subjects, while allowing the events that were taking place in the environment to remain virtually uninterrupted; and, because it allowed the researcher to attain a more complete understanding of the teachers' beliefs from the teachers' own points of view (Yin, 1991). The methods used to explore teachers' beliefs in multiple classroom settings were those associated with prolonged field observation and in-depth interview strategies (Jorgensen, 1989).

Also used were various types of interviews. Each interview yielded information that directly responded to the need to clarify a classroom occurrence or an entry from the teachers' reflective journals. Transcripts from each interview were made which provided a rich source of descriptive data and

preserved the integrity of the teachers' own perceptions of their interactions within their individual classrooms.

Extensive field observations were conducted to obtain first-hand knowledge of the methods and approaches used by the teachers as they taught their first grade students. In addition to interviews, observations and resulting field notes, the five teachers were asked to participate in a "Reflective Activity" (Meyerson, 1993), which involved developing a "web" that identified not only their beliefs about teaching, but also the influencing factors that impacted those beliefs. It was found that influencing factors could be categorized into two basic categories: those factors that represented internal influences and those representing external influences. Figure 1 shows not only the influencing factors but the resulting impact on the teachers' belief system which in tern influenced the teachers thinking, planning and decisions all resulting in the way the teacher practiced in the classroom. (See Figure #1).

Information from all of these sources was triangulated in an attempt to understand and describe how important teachers' beliefs are to teaching diverse, at-risk first graders. Conclusions were drawn as a result of using a constant comparative method of data analysis.

Subjects of the Study:

The basis of the information presented comes from findings of a multiple case study that was conducted with five first grade teachers who were observed during an academic school year in an effort to identify those methods and strategies that rendered successful literacy development for their student. The five teachers in this study are all Caucasian women, ranging in age from twenty-seven to forty-nine. All five teachers are married

and all have children. Three of the teachers were educated at the local university, the remaining two at schools outside the state. One of the teachers has her masters degree, the others hold bachelors degrees in elementary education. Total teaching experience ranged from two to fourteen years. Two teachers have been teaching first grade for four years, the others less than two years.

Criteria for Selection:

The first criterion for selection was that the teachers had to be employed in high-risk schools; that is, schools in which a large percentage of the student population was considered at-risk. I also predetermined that each teacher should be employed at a different school, thereby eliminating any possible collaboration between teachers in the same school, which could possibly modify and/or bias the results of this study. Each teacher represented one of the five categories of teachers' beliefs about reading instruction as determined by the Propositions About Reading Instruction Inventory (Duffy & Metheny, 1979). Since there are a variety of reading instruction methods, I wanted to describe teachers of at-risk students who used varied instructional methods. Another criterion was that all teachers would volunteer to participate in the study. An additional criterion was that only first grade, self-contained classrooms would be used.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Erickson (1986) states that the purpose of analyzing data from qualitative studies is "to generate empirical assertions, largely through induction" (p. 146). According to Yin (1989), it is the prerogative of the researcher to determine the data evidence sources presented for analysis;

therefore, I used only those data sources that directly supported how teachers' beliefs influenced classroom practice.

In most cases, data was collected and analyzed simultaneously and continuously using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss, 1987). Analysis procedure consisted of reading and rereading field notes, reading transcriptions of and listening to audio tapes of interviews conducted with the teachers in the study, looking for patterns of actions and meaning in the data, and reflecting on the data by writing theoretical memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process continued throughout the data collection segment of the project in order to confirm, expand, or negate assumptions about the influence of teachers' beliefs on classroom practice. For example, one assumption made was that teachers are able to articulate their beliefs if given the opportunity to do so. During the study, it was found that these five teachers clearly articulated their beliefs about classroom practice, the at-risk child, and literacy instruction, both verbally and through their writing in the reflective activity.

As a final analysis procedure, key linkages were looked for in the data connecting similar instances of the same phenomenon across different subjects. For example, as teachers' stated beliefs about teaching at-risk children were looked at, it was found that all five participants had concerns about behavior problems exhibited by the children and how those problems influenced classroom instruction.

Findings/Conclusions:

The following findings and conclusions may be drawn from this investigation of teachers' beliefs. I have included implications for teacher educators in an effort to help them better preservice teachers for their role in the at-risk classroom:

1. There is a direct relationship between teachers' beliefs and practice.

* We must provide teachers the opportunity to examine and articulate their beliefs as they work and plan for teaching the at-risk student. The teachers in this study collectively stated that, "...whatever the basis for one's beliefs, we tend to follow our own convictions". Strong beliefs were articulated about: 1) the instructional paradigms within which they operated, estpcially for literacy instruction, 2) the diverse studetnt population, and 3) the environments they created for their students. Upon observation and analysis teachers belief statements supported their practice regarding instruction, the student and the classroom environment.

2. Teachers do hold specific beliefs about teaching diverse students considered to be at-risk.

* Often times, these beliefs are not realistic. Teachers do not have the educational background to deal with the multiciplicity of issues surrounding the at-risk student. In our Colleges of Education we must build into the curriculum a plan for addressing the unique needs of this population of students. Similarly, preservice teachers must understand and address the important impact of the family and the home situation on the at-risk student. Just as we have addressed the need to support the child with a language needs, we must also take into account cultural diversity, individual family practices and the way the family unit is constructed, looking closely at customs traditions, and economic issues.

3. The diverse instruction paradigms within which teachers function are a direct result of an individual belief system that is influenced by theory, practical experience, and a need to meet the individual needs of the student.

*By evaluating the individual teachers' belief systems as stated through their own words in a device such as the " reflective web" used in the study, I was readily able to determine that influencing factors such as family, educational experiences and teaching experiences that were instrumental in shaping the paradigm within which they operate. Mostly however, the teachers in this study stated that they were influenced by what they had been taught in their teacher preparation programs and that it was difficult, if not impossible to change those acquired beliefs. The impact of the unique student population was the influencing factor that changed their practice to a great degree. But, many times it took a great deal of time for these factors to be of serious consequence in shifting the educational paradigm within which the teacher operated with comfort. This is the reason that teacher education programs must address the issue of teaching the diverse student population now.

4. Teachers are able to articulate their beliefs about teaching diverse at-risk children.

*Although agreed upon by all of the teachers in this study, it was found that teachers rarely have the opportunity to articulate their beliefs. It was found that few, if any, had ever been asked what their belief system consisted of or what had influenced their beliefs. Amazingly, what the teachers discovered about themselves when they re-examined their belief statements was that they did have strong beliefs and supported their beliefs by their actions and practice. Consequently, it was determined that for these five teachers, they were doing in their pratice what they said they were doing.

5. Curriculum must minimize the at-risk influences that impact students from diverse backgrounds and maximize the learning opportunities for them while in school.

* Over and over the statement that "all children must be given the opportunity to succeed in school" was articulated by the teachers in this study. Indeed, these children are victims of their environment and family circumstances, they can and must be given the encouragement, strategies, and opportunity to learn.

6. Motivated teachers are able to identify individual strengths in their diverse, at-risk students.

* The teachers in this study felt that many teachers lack the motivation to seek out the resources, strategies, and methods most suited to meet the needs of at-risk students. Perhaps the most important idea taken from this research was that "we must not expect the child to conform to the ways of the school, but rather, the school must conform to the needs of the child". Simply put, that means that teachers must meet the needs of the individual child when and where they are, each and every day. Understanding and valuing family, culture, customs, language and the circumstances surrounding daily existence for the at-risk child is the only way to reach this child; and, it is the only way to keep in touch academically.

7. A structured learning environment provides the best opportunities for diverse, at-risk children to be successful.

*For many at-risk students, structure is non-existent in their world. Structure equates to consistency, stability and reliability. Therefore,

structure in the classroom offers a sense of security and an understanding that is vital to their well being and academic success.

8. The most dominant and consistent pedagogical practice exhibited by all participants during the course of this study was the need to maintain order in the classroom and to create a sense of bonding and trust for diverse, at-risk children.

* Each teacher articulated the belief that the at-risk classroom must represent a "safe haven" for the at-risk child. Being able to take risk and still be accepted is critical to the child's well being and building of self esteem. The teachers told that, "often the children will be visibly upset over an upcoming holidays or weekends. Usually, they are the first to arrive at school and the last to leave, the reason, school is a safe and secure place to be". A stable environment, a stable adult and a stable routine give the at-risk child a reason for succeeding at school. When children want to succeed, problem behavior, inattentiveness and misconduct are lessened.

9. Finally, as teachers, we must continue to hold high expectations for our diverse, at-risk student population and create a learning environment that supports that belief.

*The methods of achieving success may be different but the final outcome must be the same, "success for all". For the teachers in this study, the methods, pedagogy, and environments were visibly different, yet the same in many obvious ways.

All, centered their teaching talents as teachers and their energies on creating an environment and curriculum that met the individual needs of the children, and the collective needs as required by the age and nature of their

students. In these classrooms, the teachers really cared about the children and over and over again, these words were "...You can do it, I won't let you fail."

Educational importance of the study:

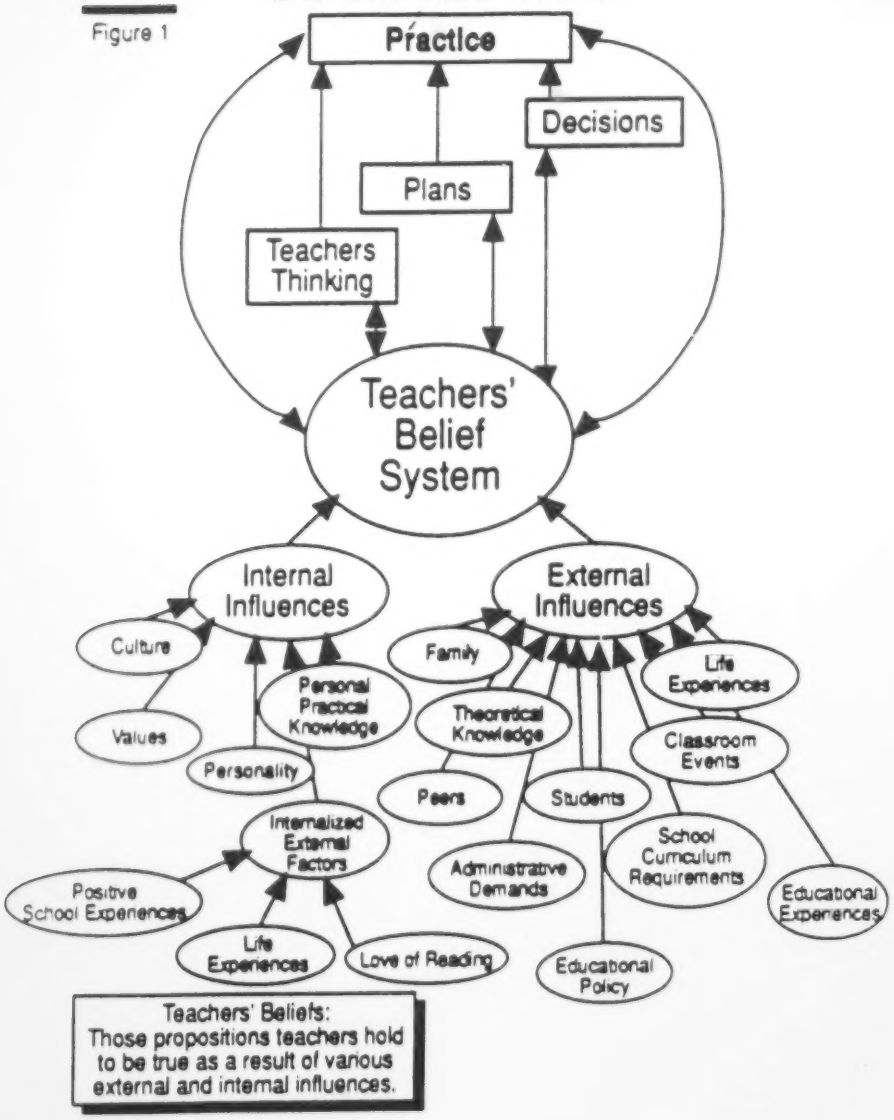
With continuing emphasis placed on meeting the educational needs of students from diverse backgrounds, educators remain concerned about the best way to teach students, especially the very young student. Similarly, teacher educators should better understand the importance of incorporating various strategies and methods into the curriculum for pre-service teacher education students preparing to teach culturally diverse, at-risk students. It is my hope that through research such as this, classroom teachers and teacher educators may begin to look more closely at the importance of how teachers' beliefs influence curriculum development for culturally diverse at-risk children. Attention should be given to how educators prepare preservice teachers who may teach in situations involving teaching those children as well as inservice support for those teaching in similar educational environments. Conclusions made from this study do support the initial assumption that uniquely different approaches can and should be used in order to successfully teach at-risk children; therefore, this study is critical to those developing education workshops and programs for inservice teachers. Additionally, the five case studies validate the work of previous researchers who suggested that teachers' beliefs are an integral part of classroom practice. They provided documented instances of the congruency between beliefs and classroom practice.

When the teachers in the study were asked for their concluding thoughts they responded with the following thoughts. "Teachers at both the university and public school level must: 1) know as much as possible about

the strategies and methods that prove effective for teaching at-risk students, 2) teachers must understand the importantance of getting families and the greater community involved in the education of the at-risk child, 3) teachers must have the opportunity to talk about, and get in touch with their own beliefs about teaching the at-risk child, and 4) we must continually evaluate and improve our practice through education, reading and research related to the at-risk student."

Figure 1

TEACHERS' BELIEF SYSTEM



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